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AUTHOR Houston, Linda; Johnson, Candice
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ABSTRACT

After much trial and error, the Agricultural Technical Institute of the Ohio State University (ATI/OSO) discovered that training of writing lab tutors can best be done through collaboration of the Writing Lab Coordinator with the "Development of Tutor Effectiveness" course offered at the institute. The ATI/OSO main computer lab and secondary lab are equipped with IBM-compatible computers and staffed by peer tutors. Students as well as tutors come to the lab because it is a community of writers. Students who desire to become a tutor must successfully complete the three-credit-hour course. Students enrolled in the course: (1) develop an awareness and understanding of themselves and their behavior in relation to the students they tutor; (2) gain an awareness of the issues and concerns faced by adult learners; and (3) develop the interpersonal and communication skills needed to effectively relate to their peers in a tutoring capacity. Ongoing communication is essential between the lab coordinator, the tutoring course instructor, and the tutors. Combining the strengths of a well coordinated writing lab with the strengths of an effective tutoring course has provided ATI/OSO a workable solution to the problem of tutor training. (Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS: PEER TUTOR TRAINING FOR WRITING CENTER TECHNIQUES WHICH FOSTER DIALOGUE IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Presented at 83rd Annual NCTE Convention in Pittsburgh, PA
Linda Houston and Candice Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

Tutor training. What is it? Of what does it consist? What should it include? Who should do it? Should it be required? How long should it be? We at The Agricultural Technical Institute of The Ohio State University (ATI/OSU) struggled for several years with these and similar questions regarding training for Writing Lab tutors. After much trial and error, we have finally arrived at a combination of efforts and endeavors that seem to be working quite well. The mix we have found helpful involves the collaboration of the Writing Lab Coordinator with the *Development of Tutor Effectiveness* course offered at the institute. A description of the ATI/OSU Writing Lab, including an explanation of its users and the *Development of Tutor Effectiveness* course will be the focus of this article.

WRITING LAB DESCRIPTION

ATI/OSU main computer writing laboratory has 16 IBM compatible, hard drive computers where WordPerfect 5.1 is used along with a manual highlighting the necessary functions for beginning students. It has been our policy to hire tutors to staff the Laboratory from 8 A.M. until 10 P.M. Monday through Thursday; from 8 A.M. until 3 P.M. on Friday, and from 5 P.M. until 9 P.M. Sunday evening.

At another area of the Institute, there is a second computer laboratory containing 18 IBM compatible, hard drive computers along with 20 other computers similar to those found in the Writing Laboratory. Traditionally, we have provided peer tutors in this lab one or two nights a week, including Sunday evening.

The Writing Laboratory is used consistently fall and winter quarters with a drop off during the spring and summer months when many of our students are involved in a cooperative work program. It is important to note that 68% of the 1993 ATI/OSU incoming students were identified as being "at risk," so along with the need for the Writing Lab, we also service a special needs population requiring a committed effort to continuing services.

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During Fall Quarter, 1993 , there were 2,096 Writing Laboratory visits, not including use during finals week. Out of a student body of 732, four hundred students used the official Writing Lab. We have not kept statistics on the other labs since they have not been officially a part of our program.

Evaluations from students using the Lab have been positive. Students as well as tutors come to the Lab because it is a community of writers; they feel safe; they feel welcome.

TUTOR TRAINING COURSE

Development of Tutor Effectiveness is a relatively new Social Science elective offered at the institute. The course was developed in response to our concern about the effectiveness of peer tutors at ATI/OSU. The fact that the course is for all peer tutors, rather than limited to Writing Lab tutors, is a plus in that students get a broad view of the tutoring process. Specifics about Writing Lab situations are provided by the Writing Lab Coordinator during regular Writing Lab staff meetings which will be described later.

Students who desire to become a tutor must successfully complete the three credit-hour course, which they can use to fulfill one of their Social Science elective requirements. Students need permission to take the course, and prior to enrolling, must demonstrate personal commitment and motivation as well as appropriate competency in the course they wish to tutor. As a part of the course, students must tutor a minimum of six hours per week, or 42 per quarter. Since this is part of the course requirement, students are not paid for these hours of service. The course was developed to provide prospective tutors a look at various learning styles and tutoring techniques to prepare them to be effective peer tutors. This is done by helping students gain self-awareness and self-understanding, by helping students gain an awareness of the issues and concerns of adult learners, and by helping students develop interpersonal and communication skills.

Students enrolled in the course develop an awareness and understanding of themselves and their behavior in relation to the students they tutor. By using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), tutors learn about their preferences in learning, in tutoring, and in living. While the MBTI does not claim to be a comprehensive instrument for measuring learning styles (Provost & Anchors, 1987), it does indicate the way an individual prefers to receive information, to make judgments, to draw energy, and to order his/her life (Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Myers & Myers, 1980). In addition, the MBTI points out important strengths of the individual which can be used to predict likely behaviors and indicate effective instructional tools (Johnson, 1991). As students learn about themselves, they learn about each other. This look into human behavior provides students a framework for realizing that different does not mean bad. These students learn to see differences as positive; they learn to celebrate the uniqueness of individuals. They come to appreciate that we, as

individual members of a society, provide balance to each other. This self-understanding has proven to be a vital link to our tutors' effectiveness. As one tutor wrote in his journal, "When I began this class I felt that it would just be some busy work and I would not learn much. I thought that tutoring would require little effort and would be relatively easy. Well, I was wrong on both accounts. I learned a lot about myself and the people that I tutored. I found out that, due to different personality types, tutoring involves more than just explaining the subject to someone. This class helped me to understand this much better, thus making me a better tutor."

Students enrolled in the course also gain an awareness of the issues and concerns faced by adult learners. Students learn about implementing Bloom's *Taxonomy* of the cognitive domain (1956); they study Check (1984), Knowles (1989), and Knox (1977) to learn about how adults learn. As they gain this knowledge, they learn even more about themselves and their own learning propensities. Issues such as diversity, sexual harassment, and collaborative learning are addressed; however, as with all other aspects of the class, gaining the knowledge is not enough. Students practice applying their knowledge during role play situations and in their tutoring experiences. Students learn about working with their peers who have learning disabilities. With the help of the video How Difficult Can This Be? (1990), students spend seventy minutes experiencing life as a learning disabled person. They experience the frustration, anxiety, and tension that students with learning disabilities often face. They are surprised to learn how difficult seemingly easy tasks can be for these students, and yet that techniques used for learning disabled students work well for students without learning disabilities.

In addition, students enrolled in the course develop the interpersonal and communication skills needed to effectively relate to their peers in a tutoring capacity. Students study the motivational theories of Herzberg, Maslow, Vroom, and Nadler and Lawler (Sergiovanni & Starratt 1988) to learn and practice strategies to improve their motivational and listening skills. Probably the most significant learning takes place during class time designated for sharing. Having class time to share the joys and turmoils of tutoring provides students with their own support group as they learn about themselves and others. This safe environment encourages students to build their communicative and interpersonal skills as they try new techniques during role play exercises. Class time is provided for students to role play typical situations encountered by tutors in tutoring sessions. Often, however, students themselves will initiate a role play exercise based on a problem they faced that week. Students seeking to learn how others would handle a situation not only builds interpersonal and communicative skills, but also provides empowerment to these students and to others in the class as they take charge of their own learning. Tutors further improve their communicative skills by keeping journals of their tutoring experiences and sharing many of their entries with fellow tutors during class sessions. As one student wrote, "A great deal of what I learned came from experience and the recording of that experience in my journal."

Ongoing communication is essential between the Lab Coordinator, the tutoring course instructor, and the tutors. The faculty member teaching the *Development of Tutor Effectiveness* course is in daily contact with the Coordinator of the Writing Lab. Through this contact, concerns and topics are discussed for follow-up with the Writing Lab tutors. Tutors meet every two weeks with the Writing Lab Coordinator. The first half of the meeting is spent going over issues that need to be addressed such as computer maintenance, specific assignment techniques, and issues that, although have been discussed in the course, arise and need further discussion and feedback. The second half of the meeting is devoted to concerns of the tutors as they share issues that have surfaced, problems among themselves, organization of the Lab, and Lab regulations. To encourage ongoing communication, each tutor and the Lab Coordinator has a mailbox in a file cabinet maintained in the Lab.

CONCLUSION

Combining the strengths of a well coordinated Writing Lab with the strengths of an effective tutoring course has provided ATI/OSU a very workable solution to the problem of tutor training. Requiring students who wish to become peer tutors to enroll in the *Development of Tutor Effectiveness* course and providing Writing Lab tutors the benefits of regular staffing and ongoing training has, indeed, improved our tutor effectiveness in the Writing Lab.

Linda Houston is an Associate Professor in the Division of Arts, Science, and Business at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio, and is Coordinator of the Writing Lab.

Candice Johnson is an Instructional Designer at The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio, and teaches the *Development of Tutor Effectiveness* course.

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